

Rural primary care student program receives \$3M endowment

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Rural Scholar Rivers Woodward is now in Asheville for his third and fourth year of medical school with the Asheville campus of UNC School of Medicine. According to MAHEC, there is a shortage of 140 family medicine doctors in Western North Carolina. Photo courtesy of MAHEC

The Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC) is pleased to announce a \$3 million endowment from The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust in support of the Kenan Primary Care Medical Scholars Program. The goal of this program is to inspire the best medical students from the UNC School of Medicine to pursue careers in primary care medicine in underserved rural and urban areas of the state.

“The vision of the Kenan Primary Care Medical Scholars program is the same as our mission at

MAHEC,” said **Dr. Jeffery Heck**, president and CEO of MAHEC. “We are here to attract, train and mentor the best students who become outstanding physicians committed to rural medicine in Western North Carolina. We are grateful that the Kenan Family and the UNC School of Medicine is supporting this urgent need to increase the supply of rural physicians in our state.”

The rural medicine program is a collaboration between the UNC School of Medicine (UNC SOM), The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust and MAHEC. Established in 2013, students from UNC SOM with an interest in medicine for rural/underserved communities receive financial support, a summer internship and enrichment experiences in medical school to sharpen their focus.

“Access to high quality healthcare is one of the most significant challenges for rural communities. Though 20 percent of America’s population lives in rural areas, less than 10 percent of its physicians do,” explained Dr. Geoff Jones, clinical co-director of the program. “There is very good evidence that exposing medical students to rural health careers during their education increases the likelihood that they will choose to practice in a small community. Medical schools with rural health programs will play a key role in supplying the rural workforce of the future.”

Rivers Woodward is a medical school student from Sylva who says the experience has helped him retain his passion for medicine: “I have come to believe that, as physicians and community leaders in rural areas, we have a vital function in the community. It is our responsibility to inspire the youth of Western

North Carolina to take pride in their communities and seek unique solutions to the health-care shortages within their communities. Community is also very important to me, and I hope to one day practice in a town where I can care for many generations of a single family.”

residency in primary care, general surgery or psychiatry and for placement in practice in rural and urban under-served communities in North Carolina.

For the Rural Primary Care Scholars, their medical school curriculum is complemented by field experience and opportunities to enhance knowledge and skill sets specific to rural medical practice. Program components include:

- 15 – 20 group discussions which begin during their first year of medical school;
- A 6-week summer internship living and working in a rural community in WNC;
- Completion of a community project;
- Involvement in a supportive, professional cohort;
- Opportunities to mentor undergraduate students from WNC schools; and
- Guaranteed acceptance into the Asheville campus of the 3rd and 4th year UNC SOM.

This summer, five rural Kenan Primary Care Medical Scholars are living throughout WNC and are mentored by physicians in Linville, Burnsville, Cherokee, Bryson City and Robbinsville. Two of the rural physicians are former MAHEC residents: Dr. Joan Queng at the Tallulah Health Center and Dr. Ben Stepp of Swain County Medical Center.

“MAHEC is grateful for the rural physicians who are dedicated as mentors and created a great learning experience for these student Scholars,” said Heck, “The Kenan Charitable Trust will help ensure that medical school debt will not impede these students’ ability to pursue rural medicine.”

The endowment from The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust will provide scholarships to support the second, third and fourth years of medical school and reduce student debt by a total of \$30,000 per Primary Care Scholar. Kenan funds will provide additional debt reduction for placement in a North Carolina